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# Tunisia is stable today, but worried about tomorrow

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**TUNIS.** Tunisia — This small country wedged in the western Mediterranean between Algeria and Libya has endured several assaults against its historic but endangered stability in the last year.

Most analysts in the region count Tunisia among the most moderate and most progressive states of the North African Maghreb, and a firm friend of the United States.

Under the leadership of President Habib Bourguiba, the nation of about 7 million has made enormous strides toward democratization, sexual equality, public education and a higher-than-average standard of living since becoming an independent state.

But now, after three decades of independence, Mr. Bourguiba — declared president for life in 1974 — is 85 years old and in ill health. The question of who will take over after he dies is a source of anxiety among those who count on Tunisia as a stable state.

The high literacy rate among Tunisians is a source of pride, but the country's economy does not provide enough jobs for the number of Tunisians entering the job market. The country has a chronic unemployment rate of almost 20 percent.

Mr. Bourguiba's determination to build a secular state has provoked resentment in a sector of the population lately inspired by the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, especially among university students.

The emergence of a wealthy class separated by a large gap from the poor also has fed discontent.

"The country is in a severe economic crunch," said a Western diplomat stationed in Tunis. "Great discrepancies exist in Tunisian society. You have a questioning about values, and how far they have strayed from Islam. Someone could certainly tap the reservoir of concern here."

This summer, the "someone" turned out to be Col. Muammar el Kadhafi.

Beset with his own economic problems and furious over a visit to Washington by President Bourguiba, the Libyan leader suddenly began expelling tens of thousands of an estimated 90,000 Tunisians who were working in Libya.

The expulsion had a devastating effect on Tunisia, for it meant a drastic reduction in the foreign income brought in by those workers. It also meant that the Tunisian economy suddenly had to absorb these workers and find employment for them.

At the same time, according to Tunisian government sources and Western diplomats, Libya refused to pay for millions of dollars' worth of imports from Tunisia and canceled orders for even more. The net loss from the Libyan action was reported to be in the neighborhood of \$200 million.

"Stopping all this trade and the expulsions of Tunisian workers caused a very great crisis for this country, which already has severe economic problems," said Mahmoud Mestiri, the Tunisian secretary of state for foreign affairs.

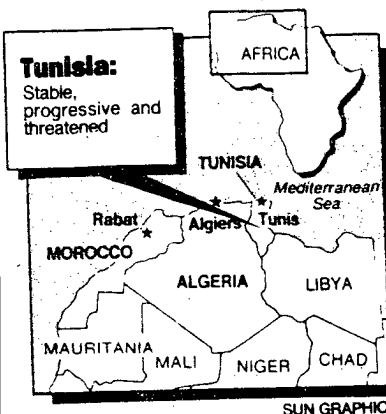
The relationship between the two countries turned nastier still when Libyan fighter planes entered Tunisian airspace three times in August.

Tunisia complained angrily. Washington warned that U.S. military force might be used to prevent Libyan incursions.

In September, according to officials, letter bombs were mailed to Tunisian journalists who had been writing against Libya. Postal workers were injured in three incidents.

Tunisia, contending that the letter bombs had been brought in by Libyans using their diplomatic immunity, broke diplomatic relations with its mischievous neighbor.

"All our positions are completely different," said Mr. Mestiri. "They want revolution. We are moderate.



"They want socialism. We want a free economy. We dislike everything they do in foreign affairs. Kadhafi doesn't like what we do. Yet, we have tried to coexist."

Or, as one diplomatic source here put it, "Bourguiba feels very strongly that Kadhafi is a threat not only to the Maghreb but to the whole Mediterranean region. He believes that Kadhafi is crazy."

"Now the money has stopped and the workers are coming back, so why should we maintain the posture of trying to cooperate?" asked Mr. Mestiri. "As long as Kadhafi is there, we are not going to have anything to do with them."

It was not the first time that Colonel Kadhafi had interfered dramatically in Tunisia. In 1974 he and President Bourguiba signed a unity accord, but Mr. Bourguiba reneged on the accord within 24 hours, and relations between the two countries

have been sour ever since.

In 1980, an armed force tried to take over the central Tunisian town of Gafsa. The invasion was believed to have been directed from Libya by Tunisians trained in Libya. The invasion was put down, but it set off a massive increase in U.S. military aid to Tunisia, despite the contentions that what Tunis required was greater economic assistance, not tanks and aircraft.

Most intelligence sources believe that Colonel Kadhafi is training hundreds — perhaps thousands — of anti-government Tunisians.

"The danger from Kadhafi is real," said one Tunisian official. "He is a very dangerous man. He respects no international law, no neighborly pact."

The confrontation between Libya and Tunisia has died down somewhat recently. The feeling of many observers here was that Colonel Kadafi had done more to unite Tunisians against a common enemy than to aggravate existing divisions.

But the residual consequences of the late-summer confrontation remained, including the need to put the expelled workers to work in Tunisia and to try to recover from the estimated \$200 million loss in trade.

Two observers, one of them a resident of some 20 years in the country, said that Mr. Bourguiba and Prime Minister Mohammed Mezali had managed to use the confrontation to distract from domestic divisions.

Then on Oct. 1 another invader struck: The Israeli air force sent planes to hit the headquarters of the Palestine Liberation Organization outside the capital.

"Coming right after his fight with Kadafi and his [Mr. Bourguiba's] dependence on support from the U.S., the Israeli raid using American planes and President Reagan's outspoken support for the raid placed Bourguiba in a painfully awkward position," said one regional analyst.

"The Israelis killed Tunisians in the raid," another observer said. "Bourguiba was furious."

Less than two weeks later, Tunisia was placed in a difficult position

again when it refused landing permission to an Egyptian aircraft carrying the four hijackers of the ship the Achille Lauro and other Palestinian and Egyptian officials, thus facilitating the U.S. interception of the Egyptian plane over the Mediterranean and its diversion to Sicily.

The gesture was regarded as a reflection of Mr. Bourguiba's abiding sympathy for the United States, but it provoked the wrath of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who accused Tunis of conspiring with Washington.

The fact that Mr. Bourguiba appeared to have survived all these events without any major internal upheaval is regarded here as testimony to his personal stature as the father of Tunisia's independence

from France and the country's progress into the modern age.

To hear his supporters tell it, Mr. Bourguiba presides benignly over one of the freest, most democratic states in the region.

"Kadafi is motivated to destabilize Tunisia because this is a free country," contended one senior Tunisian official. "The Tunisian model is a threat to Kadafi, an example that Libyans can see and envy. Kadafi wants to bring down the regime which brought this about."

But according to some diplomats and observers here, Mr. Bourguiba also hangs onto power through occasional shifts in his Cabinet, by declaring illegal several opposition parties, and through the occasional exile or imprisonment of rivals.

The leaders of the Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique, an Islamic fundamentalist movement, were imprisoned in 1981 but released in 1984 when it became clear that the imprisonment had failed to reduce the activities of the group.

Habib Ashour, the dynamic leader of the General Union of Tunisian Workers, stirred up angry anti-government demonstrations several years ago and paid for it with imprisonment and later house arrest.

Ahmed Ben Salah, a socialist prominent in the Bourguiba regime, made a grab at power when the president became ill in 1968. He was imprisoned for treason after Mr. Bourguiba recovered, and he has been living in exile in Europe since 1973, when he escaped from prison.